

“The Magnificat: Mary’s Song”

Luke 1:47-55

“Hush, little baby, don’t you cry...”

Every good mother knows the calming power of a lullaby to help settle a fussy baby.

There’s something about a mother’s voice that can bring a sense of peace — or “lull,” as the word suggests — to help a little one drift into a blessed rest.

That rest is good for the child — and good for the mother, too!

It turns out that there’s some real science behind the apparent influence of music and a mother’s voice on the development of a child, and that power extends to the womb before the child takes his or her first breath in the world.

Studies have shown, for example, that fetuses can sense audio vibrations and rhythms early in pregnancy — so much so that the baby is able to recognize the parents’ voices right after birth. When a mom sings to her unborn child, particularly when she sings the same song over and over, the maternal crooning can actually lower the fetal heart rate and calm the child in utero. The data suggests that even reading a story many times to an unborn child can result in a newborn’s preference for that story throughout childhood.

In other words, a song or a story can imprint a child’s mind even before he or she is born. A familiar song or story, sung and repeated over and over, can have a lasting influence.

Christmas carols are some of the most familiar songs we sing, and we might imagine that a baby born close to Christmas might prefer those songs over any other, particularly if mom has a

favorite that she sings. In Luke's gospel, the first Christmas carol sung is the one composed by a young mother named Mary who was suddenly expecting a child.

It's a song of praise to the Lord which we now know as the *Magnificat* (from the Latin of the first line in verse 47: "My soul magnifies the Lord"), but it's also a song that sets the stage for the mission that her divine and human Son will undertake.

Some scholars and theologians like John Wesley have seen Mary's song as proof that she should be numbered among the biblical prophets because her song was composed "under a prophetic impulse."

Others think that Luke placed these words in the mouth of Mary as a way of introducing the themes of his gospel and Jesus' future ministry. If we assume the former, and we see her song as divinely inspired, then it's not a stretch to see this as a song Mary repeatedly sang to her unborn child and, if so, to see it as an influence imprinted on him even before he emerged in a manger in Bethlehem.

Yes, Jesus was divine and clearly had a divine mission, but could it have been the early imprint of his mother's song that reinforced all that he was about to do? Could this first-ever carol been the song to which he returned when under stress and needing assurance that, despite the opposition, he was doing the work ordained for him from the beginning?

If you're waiting for the arrival of a baby, you know it's going to take nine months, give or take. That's a lot of time for prenatal singing! But the song that Mary sings is a derivative of one that God's people had been singing for a long time, hoping for the birth of a Savior that would

come and set things right. The announcement of the Savior's coming went all the way back into Israel's history — all the way back to Abraham.

So she sings,

*He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever. (vv. 54-55)*

God promised Abraham that from his family, all the families of the world would be blessed. From that family came a nation called Israel, whom God rescued from slavery in Egypt and gave them a promised land. There, God established a king, David, and promised David that one of his descendants would sit on the throne of Israel forever and establish God's justice and mercy and peace — God's kingdom — for the whole world.

But Abraham's family and David's kingdom both crumbled under the weight of sin. What could have been beautiful became broken because of their disobedience and rejection of God. The result was a people that were broken, exiled, occupied and enslaved not only by the foreign powers of Babylon and now Rome, but by the even more insidious powers of sin and death that enslaved the whole world.

The promise of the prophets, was that one day a new king would be born who would topple the powers of sin and death by taking them head on. Isaiah had talked about him as the Suffering

Servant, the Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, the One for whom the whole world was waiting (Isaiah 9:2-7).

Mary knew this story because it was the story of her people. For her, as for all of God's people, the story of Scripture was *the* story.

And now, somehow, impossibly, unbelievably, this young mother was going to play a supporting role. The time of waiting was coming to an end, and all she could do was sing!

“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” she sings (v. 47). Her song is designed to magnify, intensify, reflect and make brighter what God is doing through her son, God's Son.

God announces the imminent arrival of the Promised One to the very people who need to hear it most: the poor, the lowly, the broken and the marginalized — those who have no power.

Mary represents them as a young woman, barely perceived as a person in that patriarchal culture. She had no status and no prospects. With a common name, she was living in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere.

And yet, she sings: “He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (v. 48).

Remember that when the angel greeted Mary he addressed her as “favored one” (v. 28). It was not that Mary was particularly righteous or worthy, though some Christian traditions have assumed that understanding. She was “favored” or blessed with the task of bearing the Messiah. Like her ancestor Abraham, God “favored” Mary, an ordinary girl in an ordinary place, and

blessed her so that she might be a blessing to the world, a vital link in the covenant chain that God had begun with Abraham generations before (Genesis 12:2).

We call her blessed because she blessed the world by saying “yes” to God: “Let it be with me according to your word” (v. 38).

The blessing that God will work through her will come by way of the Son that she bears, God’s own Son, who will come to save his people from sin, but also to overturn the power structures that had so long held people in slavery. She sings:

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty. (vv. 50-53)

What Mary sings about here is the promise of what happens when God occupies the earth as its true king. When God is king, all human power structures get overturned — the proud are replaced by the humble, the hungry are filled and the wealthy go hungry.

If you pay attention to the verbs in her song, they are all in the past tense. Mary sings as though these things have already happened. Such is the confidence of faith! The child whom she

carries is God's own Messiah, and this Messiah is actually God come in the flesh: the king who comes and announces in his words and actions that the kingdom has arrived.

To put it another way, we might say that Mary's song is the outline for everything that God's Son will do when he grows to manhood.

- He will scatter the proud and self-righteous by exposing their true selves.
- He will challenge powerful kings like Herod and Caesar, by demonstrating the power of love.
- He will advocate for justice, mercy and peace.
- He will sit with the poor, hungry, sinners and outcasts, filling them with hope.
- He will denounce the wealthy who oppress the poor.
- He will expect his followers to deny themselves, pick up a cross and follow him.

The gospels tell us that the rich fools and rich young rulers walked away from Jesus empty, while the poor were fed with an abundance of bread on a hillside.

The child that Mary carries will turn the world upside down, and this child heard the song of his mission even as he still enjoyed the warmth of the womb.

Mary sings, even though we know what all of this will cost her.

A sword will pierce her soul, she is warned when Jesus is just a baby (2:35).

She will lose him and frantically search for him for three days when he's a boy because he is about his father's work in the temple (2:41-52).

She will think he has gone completely mad when he turns 30 and leaves home to start preaching and challenging powerful people (8:19-21; Mark 3:21).

She will suffer the agony of watching him die on a cross, nailed there by the powers that always do that to those who would oppose them (23:44-49).

Mary may not have had all this in mind when she composed her carol, and it is quite possible she sang this song again and again when it seemed like things were going horribly wrong for her son.

Then again, when she saw him alive three days after his death, her song would have meant even more!

We sing our familiar Christmas carols, too, but we must sing them knowing that Good Friday is not far away. We sing them knowing where this child will go and what he will do. We sing them knowing that there is a cross ahead, but also an empty tomb.

While “*The Magnificat*” may not be on the hot list of Christmas music played on the radio during this season, it’s the song that reminds us who Jesus is and what he is about.

It can remind us, too, that we are called to follow him in lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and saying to God every day, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (v. 37). Let it be.

May the peace of God. . .